

As lies spread – by imitation, or in retaliation, or to forestall suspected deception – trust is damaged. Yet trust is a social good to be protected just as much as the air we breathe or the water we drink. When it is damaged, the community as a whole suffers; and when it is destroyed, societies falter and collapse. (Sissela Bok, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life*, 1978)

Deception is not merely to be tolerated as an occasionally prudent aberration in a world of truth telling: it is rather an essential component of our ability to organize and shape the world, to resolve problems of coordination among individuals who differ, to cope with uncertainty and pain, to be civil and achieve privacy as needed, to survive as a species, and to flourish as persons. (David Nyberg, *The Varnished Truth: Truth Telling and Deceiving in Ordinary Life*, 1993)

Why does the king *need* a jester? To tell him crucial truths about himself, to prick the balloons of self-deception *through* the sharpness of his jests...Ideally we rely on our friends for sincerity, for insight because of the knowledge and caring that previous compassionate acts of truth telling have both constructed and protected. (Kathryn Pauly Morgan, in conversation with David Nyberg – see *Varnished Truth*)

Truth, Deception, and Interpersonal Relationships

Rabbi Laurie Zimmerman

R. Simon said: When the Holy One, blessed be God, came to create Adam, the ministering angels formed themselves into groups and parties. Some of them said, "Let him be created," while others urged, "Let him not be created," as it is written, "Loving kindness and truth met, justice and peace kissed" (Psalms 85:11). Loving kindness said, "Let him be created, because he will dispense acts of loving kindness." Truth said, "Let him not be created, because he full of lies." Justice said, "Let him be created, because he will perform acts of justice." Peace said, "Let him not be created, because he is full of strife." So what did God do? God held Truth and cast it to the ground, as it is written, "And truth will be sent to the earth" (Daniel 8:12). The ministering angels said before the Holy One, "Sovereign of the Universe! Why do you despise Your seal [truth]? Let Truth arise from the earth!" Hence it is written, "Let truth spring up from the earth." (Psalms 85:12)...While the ministering angels were arguing with each other and disputing with each other, the Holy One created the first human. God said to them, "Why are you arguing? Man has already been made!" (Bereishit Rabbah 8:5)

Truthfulness in statements which cannot be avoided is the formal duty of an individual to everyone, however great may be the disadvantage accruing to himself or to another. Thus the definition of a lie as merely an intentional untruthful declaration to another person does not require the additional condition that it must harm another...For a lie always harms another; if not some other particular man, still it harms mankind generally, for it vitiates the source of law itself. (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason and Other Writings in Moral Philosophy*, 18th century)

"I can't believe *that!*" said Alice. "Can't you?" the Queen said in a pitying tone. "Try again: draw a long breath, and shut your eyes." Alice laughed. "There's no use trying," she said: "one *can't* believe impossible things." "I dare say you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was your age I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast." (Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, 1865)

Questions for Discussion

- 1) Why did God shatter truth as opposed to peace?
- 2) Are there ever times when truth should be preserved at the expense of peace?
- 3) In the context of interpersonal relationships, what could it mean for truth to spring from the earth?
- 4) How do the modern texts support or challenge the role of truth in the midrash?
- 5) Which modern texts do you find compelling or problematic? Why?

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Raise your hand if you have ever...

- Told an acquaintance that you're doing fine because you really didn't feel like getting into what was really going on
- Told a congregation member that you really enjoyed his/her dvar Torah even though it almost put you to sleep
- Told a colleague that he/she did a fine presentation when in reality it was quite mediocre
- Told a child that you liked his/her artwork when in fact you're scouting out the nearest trash can
- Told a spouse or friend...
 - I like your new hair color
 - Your dress is flattering
 - You haven't gained weight
 - Those are great shoesWhen in fact, it is just not true

Now, don't raise your hand but consider these scenarios:

You or someone you know

- Cheated on a spouse and sought to conceal the affair
- Leaked confidential information to someone else
- Did not tell a friend incriminating information about her spouse because you did not want to upset her
- Etc.

As we have heard tonight Judaism is not black and white on the subject of truth telling. On the one hand we have an abundance of texts that glorify truth telling and condemn lying and deceit. From Torah:

- You shall not bear false witness. (Exodus 20:13)
- Distance yourself from words of falsehood. (Exodus 23:7)
- Neither shall you deal falsely nor lie to one another. (Leviticus 19:11)

And other biblical texts such as Proverbs:

- Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but they who deal truly are His delight. (Proverbs 12:22)

And plenty of rabbinic texts:

- The Holy One, blessed be He, hates a person which says one thing with his mouth and another in his heart. (Pesachim 113b)

And medieval, modern, and contemporary texts as well.

On the other hand

- We have a tremendous number of stories from the Torah where our ancestors lied, cheated, and deceived each other – and commentators often justify or condone their behavior.
- And there are texts which clearly state that we can modify the truth for the sake of peace. One of my favorites is from Avot de Rabbi Natan 12:3:
 - "Two people had quarreled with one another. Aaron went and sat with one of them. He said to him: My son, look what your friend has done, his heart is distraught and he has torn his clothes (out of sorrow regarding the quarrel), and he is saying: Woe is to me, how will I raise up my head and look at my friend? I am embarrassed in his presence, because I am the one who wronged him. And he [Aaron] sits with him until he removes the jealousy from his heart. And Aaron then goes and sits with the other party and says to him: My son, see what your friend has done, his heart is distraught and he has torn his clothes and he is saying: Woe is to me, how will I raise up my head and look at my friend? I am embarrassed in his presence, because I am the one who wronged him. And he [Aaron] sits with him until he removes the jealousy from his heart. And when they met [the two opponents who carried on the dispute between them], they embraced and kissed one another."
- You can also lie in order to practice humility, maintain modesty, protect someone from harm or embarrassment, recoup losses that are owed to you, etc.

Jewish tradition seems to be saying – and I’m grossly summarizing – that truth telling is good and lying is bad, but sometimes there is a compelling reason to lie for the sake of the greater good. Hey, if Aaron can make peace between two people who were quarreling by telling some white lies, what’s the problem? Isn’t the point that they reconciled?

Think back to the scenarios we went through at the beginning. If you told a lie or engaged in some sort of deceitfulness, was it rooted in a desire to protect someone else or was it rooted in selfishness, arrogance, exploitation, or corruption? Did you believe that it was for the greater good? Or that you had some kind of compelling reason to deceive another?

When are we justifying lying and deception out of our own cowardice or thoughtlessness and when is it truly the right thing to do?

What kind of implications does extreme honesty have on a friendship, intimate relationship, parent-child relationship, or community?

What kind of implications does lying and deceit have?

There is a need for trust and community standards for honesty. But – when to tell how much of what truth to whom

Look at texts.